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MAGIC AMONG THE BALKAN POPULATIONS : CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Alexandre Popovic*

Having been studying for a few years within the framework of my seminar of the « Centre d'histoire du domaine turc » at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris (« Modern and contemporary History of the Balkan Muslims »)¹, the magic among Muslims of Balkans, I had the opportunity to survey a very significant documentation related to magic in general in this area, concerning not only Muslim populations, but also Christian populations (orthodox and catholic) of the Peninsula. Among the first observations I made through this examination still in progress, the main one is that magic in the Muslim world, and especially among Balkan Muslims, shows a complexity incomparably larger than what one can observe among Christians. This magic rests on a literature, at the same time old and abundant, and on very varied and elaborate practices, linked in particular to beliefs in the numerical value of the letters² and to the existence of the *djinn*s³. However, there are similar elements. And it was not exceptional to see the faithful of one religion coming to consult specialists of another religion.

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¹ We have studied in this seminar, for four years now, the magic among Balkan Muslims at the end of 19th and in the 20th Century, beginning with the publications of the three main local specialists : Muhamed Garčević (born around 1893, and who died at a date not yet known, but in any cases, after 1951. On him and its works, see my article **Popovic (Alexandre)**, « À propos de la magie chez les musulmans des Balkans », in Bouillier (Véronique), Servan-Schreiber (Catherine), eds., *De l'Arabie à l'Himalaya. Chemins croisés en hommage à Marc Gaborieau*, Paris : Maisonneuve & Larose, 2004) ; Stanko Sielski (1891-1958) ; and Tihomir R. Djordjević (1868-1944), but also according to the very scattered publications of about thirty other less known authors.

² Concerning the numerical value of letters, see **Fahd (T.)**, « art. "Djafr" », *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*, Vol. II, 1956, pp. 386-388 (of the French ed.) ; and, **Fahd (T.)**, « art. "Hurûf ('ilm al-)" », *op. cit.*, Vol. III, 1967, pp. 616-617 (of the French ed.).

³ Concerning the *djinn*s, see Macdonald (D. B.), *et alii*, « art. "Djinn" », *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. II, 1963, pp. 560-563 (of the French ed.).

In this article I shall expose briefly these phenomena and make some remarks on these divergences and convergences, as well as in the domain of « theory » and « systems », as in the domain of the magic ritual and « material », through some documents concerning the 19th and 20th centuries. I shall add here two other points. First, I have to remind the reader that my research on the Balkan magic is undertaken through my own point of view, that of an « orientalist in the old way » who is interested above all in the Muslim world of the Balkans. I consequently try to understand if this one works on this precise level in the same way that the other « Muslim worlds », close or remote. But, at the same time, I try to make comparisons with the magic practiced among non-Muslims of the Balkan Peninsula, and especially among the orthodox and catholic Christians⁴. Second, I must add that we work for the moment above all on the magic among the Muslim populations of the former Yugoslavia, owing to the fact that the existing sources come mainly from these areas. However, we also hope to examine closely, as soon as possible, documents concerning the Muslims of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Rumania.

Let us now try to see, beginning with the magic practiced among Muslims of the former Yugoslavia, what are the similarities and the differences, compared to the magic practiced among Christians of ex-Yugoslavia. The first thing which very clearly arises from the texts that we examined up to now, is that we are obviously (according to the opinion of the authors of these texts) in the presence of two categories of magic, which respective borders are moreover not always very clear. The studied authors distinguish indeed, on one side, the non-religious magic, generally called by them « popular magic » and, on the other side, the religious magic. It will be easily understood that convergences are especially, but not only, to be found in the first, and the divergences in the second.

POPULAR MAGIC

Let us first look, very briefly, at the « popular magic ». The two principal examples, universally known, are the « evil eye »⁵ and the use of non-religious amulets and talismans, the famous « hamajlije » (sing. *hamajlija*), on which there is a very abundant literature, and which is supposed to have the capacity to protect from the « evil eye », from diseases in general, and from all kinds of

⁴ As well as, obviously, the Jewish populations and the Gypsies of Balkans, if I succeed in finding the necessary documentation.

⁵ In the field of the terminology, among the Slavs populations of the Balkans, one uses in fact two terms, which are practically synonyms : on one hand that of *zle oči* (which means « evil eyes », therefore in its plural form), which is/are supposed to irradiate the evil ; and, on the other hand, that of *urok* (plural « *uroci/uroki* »), which means « evil spell, magic spell », or « to cast a bad spell ».

accidents, etc. One notes that there is a very important convergence between the beliefs and the practices of the Muslims and the Christians of the former Yugoslavia, at this level.

For the ones as for the others, the « evil eye » (as the *urok*) is supposed to have the capacity to strike men, women, children, but also animals, plants, trees, vineyards, etc., even the most various inanimate objects (workshops, shops, houses, ...) and even the work of somebody. Among very many duly recorded and indexed examples, let us quote the case of a woman manufacturing soap whose neighbor suddenly arrives and asks « What are you doing there ? ». The woman has to answer, if she wants to protect the fruit of her work : « I plant garlic ». Because garlic is indeed well known, in the field of magic, by its capacity to remove away or push back the evil eye. In support of this, we have long lists, with precise references as for the place and the date where these beliefs were noted. One enumerates cases of people who are particularly vulnerable when facing the « evil eye », and categories of people who are immunized. In these lists we also find the thousand and one ways of protecting oneself from the evil eye, by the most varied stratagems or by magic formulas. We finally find the means of curing the evil eye when someone has been struck, by prayers, by magic rituals, by adapted drugs, or by a very particular method called « *bajanje* », depending on the circumstances. It is a complex method which consists in mumbling not easily audible, and more or less incomprehensible incantations ; this ritual is operated by a specialist who is, generally but not necessarily, an old woman⁶.

As for the non religious amulets and talismans – because there are also, and even especially, religious talismans – they are, very often, the same for Muslims and Christians. They can be divided into three categories : *mineral*, *vegetable* and *animal*. The amulets and talismans in question are the most varied articles chosen for their specific qualities, therefore objects which are for example particularly hard, sharp, prickly, etc., or substances which are acrid or rough to the taste (very spiced, bitter, sour, etc.), or objects which are supposed to have « magic capacities ». The most exhaustive catalogue of these, with regard to European South-East, has been for a very long time (i.e. until the publication of the five volumes issued during the last decades by Ljubinko

⁶ On this question see first the three volumes of *urok* collected in the former Yugoslavia by **Radenković (Ljubinko)**, *Urok ide uz polje. Narodna bajanja* (*Urok is walking through the fields. The popular bajanja*), Niš : Gradina, 1973 ; *Narodne basme i bajanja* (*The popular basme and bajanja*), Niš / Priština / Kragujevac : Gradina / Jedinstvo / Svetlost, 1982 ; and *Narodna bajanja* (*The popular bajanja*), Belgrade : Rad, 1983. Then, by the same author, one global analysis of *bajanja*, in general, **Radenković (Ljubinko)**, *Narodna bajanja kod Južnih Slovena* (*The popular bajanja among the South Slavs*), Belgrade, Prosveta- Balkanološki Institut SANU, 1996 [Balkanološki Institut SANU, Posebna izdanja, vol. 60] ; and finally, at a larger level, his book *Simbolika sveta u narodnoj magiji Južnih Slovena* (*The Symbolism of the World in the popular magic among the South Slavs*), Belgrade / Niš : SANU / Prosveta, 1996 [Balkanološki Institut SANU, Posebna izdanja, vol. 67].

Radenković, mentioned in the preceding footnote) that established by T. R. Djordjević⁷. Here are some examples, according to which one can notice that generally an analogical principle is at work. Among the *mineral* amulets, which are rather less widespread than the two other categories, it is necessary to quote first salt and iron (i.e. the various objects made out of iron : the knife, the horseshoe, iron nails, the poker, the sickle, the fork etc.) then silver, and much more rarely gold ; then also mercury, « lightning stones » (also called « thunder stones ») ; and finally precious and semi-precious stones. The power of the *vegetable* amulets appears in various ways, and it is necessary to use them in an adequate way : either by infusion, or by fumigations or for body baths, even carrying them on oneself. The best known are : garlic, onion, wood of yew tree, rue, nigella, bramble, hawthorn, pine cone, a reddish grass known under the name of « heart of rabbit », mallow, rosemary, pepper, coniferous tree, wood of oak, mistletoe, fern, burdock, but also « transformed plants », like bread for example, or cotton wire (white or red)⁸, etc. As for the *animal* amulets, it is necessary to begin with mentioning those which come from the human being itself (the placenta of a child at birth, i.e. « the most intern of the membranes which wrap the foetus », a small part of the navel of a new-born baby, and many other parts of the human body), then a very large variety of animal amulets (hollow bone of a dog, egg of otter, duck rump, tail of rattlesnake, small piece of rabbit tail, horns of various animals, wolf or wild boar teeth, bat head or wing, mole paw, snail, shells and corals, earth worms, scratches of eagle, of sparrow hawk or of bear, etc.).

RELIGIOUS MAGIC

Let us come now to the *religious* magic, field in which one can notice important divergences between the three great denominational groups in the Balkans : Orthodox Christians, Catholic Christians and Muslims. Two decisive reasons are at the origin of this state of affairs. The first is the ambivalence of the Islamic dogma concerning the magic. In fact « the Muslim dogma affirms the existence of invisible beings (djinnns, angels) and admits the possibility to enter in contact with them, even to obtain certain services from them »⁹. The

⁷ Djordjević (Tihomir R.), *Zle oči u verovanju Južnih Slovena* (The evil eye in the belief of the South-Slavs), Belgrade : Srpska Kraljevska Akademija, 1938 (Second ed., Belgrade : Prosveta, 1985).

⁸ Because obviously, the colors play an extremely significant role in the magic, in particular in the rural world (as Helene Gouroussi, whom I thank warmly on this occasion, pointed out to me).

⁹ Lory (Pierre), « Développement historique de la magie en terre d'islam », in Servier (Jean), éd., *Dictionnaire critique de l'ésotérisme*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, p. 770.

result of this is a « fundamental paradox as if it were inaugural of the Islamic religious system : the magic is real there, but it can be false ; real in its phenomenological expressions and virtually false in its ontological and axiologic bases. The background of this paradoxical conception is linked to the preislamic supernaturalism that Islam largely renewed while appropriating it and adapting it »¹⁰.

The second reason, which arises directly from the preceding one, is that the techniques of the religious Muslim magic rituals are infinitely more elaborate than those in use among the Balkan Christian populations. In fact, these Islamic ritual can rely as we have just seen, on one side, on the Muslim dogma, on the Islamic theology and exegesis and, on the other side, on the Muslim philosophy and the Muslim law¹¹. This is not the case of the Catholics and Orthodox, as we have nothing similar in the Christian dogmas, which might have allowed such developments of the religious magic in Christian theology.

In addition, in Muslim practice in general,

the veneration for the Qur'anic verb knew applications approaching the magic. One started to recite suras or precise fragments of Qur'an to help cure a disease (Sura 36), to war off ill fortune (Sura 113 and 114) or to move away the impure spirits. The Qur'anic text was used as a basis for some divination practices. Gradually, a true magic tradition, founded on the efficacy of the Qur'anic verb was constituted. Some Qur'anic terms, and particularly the names qualifying God Himself (the Merciful, the Powerful, the Knower, the Living, etc.), undergoing complex treatments like gematric¹² calculations, magic compositions of squares, distributions on talismanic figures, were supposed to confer a specific virtue expressed by their significance to those which had recourse to them: a talisman built on the name « the Generous » was supposed to attract generosity for example. The numerical value that each letter of the Arabic alphabet has, was used as a basis for complex speculations, very close to those practiced in the Hebraic Kabbalah. This type of magic, primarily Muslim, spread in all the Islamized areas. It could at the same time pride itself of its attachment to Muslim orthodoxy (all powers emanate from God) and of a use easier than that of the astral magic of the Ancients, which required often very erudite calculations¹³.

¹⁰ **Elboudrarry (Hassan)**, « Positions de la magie dans la pensée musulmane », in Servier (Jean), éd., *op. cit.*, p. 772.

¹¹ Among the most frequently quoted mediaeval Arab authors, it is necessary to mention the names of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 995/998 ?), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), al-Būnī (d. 1225 ?) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).

¹² Alteration of the Greek « *geōmetria* », part of the Hebraic Kabbalah, based on the arithmetical or geometrical interpretation of Biblical words.

¹³ **Lory (Pierre)**, *art. cit.*, p. 771.

Among the Balkan Muslims (as everywhere else in the Muslim world), the religious amulets are written in Arabic characters, but sometimes also by means of various secret writings. Most of the time, they appeared on small pieces of paper (in general rather white), even on rollers (from 5 to 10 cm broad, of variable length, up to 50 cm and sometimes much more, up to three meters), or on varied materials (various kinds of leather, stones, sheets of trees, egg shells, etc.). They contain either Qur'anic quotations, prayers, magic triangles or squares, usually written with a pen made out of reed, the *kalam*, but sometimes also with a gold or iron pen, if not with special grass. An amulet can be made for medical aims (fever, tooth ache, psychoses, to facilitate childbirth, etc.), or for practical or emotional aims (to have children, to obtain the love of someone, or the separation from someone, to make the beloved one returns, to know the situation of a absent person, to know the thoughts of someone, to predict the future...). The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, were in such need of amulets, that those which made them in these areas could not satisfy the demand. Thus, they had to go and fetch amulets made by Christian « specialists » (Orthodox or Catholic). If the patient was not cured by the amulets, sometimes, when the conditions could be met, one tried another magic ritual, in particular a form of very peculiar and spectacular magic, that of the *dā'ira*, or « djinns convocation »¹⁴.

Among the Balkan Christians, the religious magic rituals and practices are much less complex. They are often limited to the use of medals that are carried around the neck which iconography is very stereotyped : the Virgin, the Virgin with Jesus, Jesus, baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, angels, various saints. One can also wear medallions containing some prayers or penitences to read and to recite. It is in particular necessary to mention that the small text known under the name of « San Svete Bogorodice » (The dream of the Holy mother of God) is sometimes carried as a talisman¹⁵. People wear as well various inscriptions, or small icons and pieces of host ; more often, quite simply, people wear the cross which occupies, obviously by its symbolism, its importance and its diffusion, the very first place. The inscriptions in question are generally written with black ink and with a goose pen, or a wooden stamp of which one reproduces the imprint on a piece of paper, on a fabric, or, sometimes, directly on the skin of the sick part of the body. They contain either passages out of the Old Testament, or prayers (often apocryphal), or incantations (*bajanja*), or « magic » signs and letters, such as the famous « Seal of Solomon ».

¹⁴ On the extraordinarily complicated ritual of the *dā'ira*, one finds very detailed descriptions in the book of **Garčević (Muhamed)**, *Zapisi i hamajlije* (Talismans and amulets), Sarajevo (Državni Muzej Banja Luka, vol. I), 1942, pp. 27-44.

¹⁵ Concerning this small text, see **Djordjević (Tihomir R.)**, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-241.

In spite of these divergences, one can nevertheless see some lines of convergence in the use of pieces of sacred texts. Among the most astonishing examples of this kind, one can mention two talismans described by Djordjević¹⁶ : one with the image of the cross, the other with the image of Christ on the cross, accompanied by the inscription *mashal* written in Cyrillic characters. This is of course a truncated quotation of the well known Qur'anic expression which became thereafter the Muslim magic formula par excellence, namely the word *mashallah* (more exactly, in Arabic *mā shā' Allāh*, which means « what Allāh wants ») ! But especially, there is convergence when Muslims go to the Christian priests (and vice versa) in order to obtain talismans, even to be exorcized by the prayers of the orthodox popes¹⁷, or by those of the catholic priests or monks, all these being relatively ordinary phenomena. On this last point for example, we have about twenty archival documents (written in ottoman Turkish, and dating from the 18th century), in which the local Ottoman authorities expressly required from the monks of the famous Franciscan monastery of Fojnica, in central Bosnia, to cure by their prayers, talismans (*zapisi*) and drugs, such or such Muslim patient, supposed to be « possessed by djinns, or by the devil »¹⁸.

* * *

To conclude, let us point out that there is still a lot to do in the field of research on magic in South-Eastern Europe. On one hand, it would be necessary to collect sources and documents, scattered data, which exist in great number in the various countries of the area and to gather new material in the field. The results of these collection and research should be gathered in a data base so that this material could be accessible to all those who wish to consult it. On the other hand, it would then be necessary to analyze this information on a theoretical level, and from various points of view : anthropological, sociological, theological, that of sciences of religion, etc., which will be obviously in each case a long, extraordinarily complex and, evidently, very difficult task.

¹⁶ See Ibid. pp. 272-273, and the illustrations 50, 51, 52. Besides, one can find a very interesting testimony concerning the *zapisi* [talismans], written in Cyrillic characters by an unknown Orthodox « specialist » in Herzegovina at the very beginning of the 20th century, in the article of **Bratić (Toma A.)**, « Pabirci iz narodne medicine u Hercegovini » (Fragments concerning the popular medicine in Herzegovina), *Glasnik Zemaljskog Muzeja u Bosni i Hercegovini*, 15, 1903, pp. 153-180 (see pp. 177-178).

¹⁷ See, for example, **Djordjević (Tihomir R.)**, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

¹⁸ See **Matasović (Josip)**, « Fojnička regesta (Regesta Fojnicensia. Acta turcica, bosnensia et latina. Ex archivo conventus fratrum minorum de observantia spiritus s. Fojnicae Bosnae Argentinae) », *Spomenik*, 67 (Drugi razred, 53), 1930, pp. 61-432, in-folio ; and by the same author, « Fratri bosanski prema muslimanima "za ličit bonika" » [with a Summary in German : « Die bosnischen Franziskaner als Aerzte der Mohamedaner »], *Liječnički vjesnik, Znanstveni dio*, 53 (4), April 1931, pp. 411-419.